



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report:

Elizabet Kovačeva Bc “Abjection in Selected Plays by Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill, and Tim Crouch” MA thesis

This thesis explores the work of three of the most exciting contemporary British playwrights through the lens of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection as laid out in *Powers of Horror* (1982). The plays of Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill and Tim Crouch have garnered extensive critical attention and continues to be the focus of lively debate, so it requires particular skill and insight to find an original approach. Elizabet Kovačeva succeeds in doing so in an engaging and intellectually convincing manner that more than adequately fulfils the remit of an MA thesis.

Both the theoretical angle and corpus are concisely introduced at the outset, and the structural rationale and plan of development are clearly communicated. Ms Kovačeva selects two plays per writer, a strategy that works well to maintain focus and analytic coherence. Highlighting the ways these “plays share a tendency to forego traditional theatrical strategies of representation, even the most non-naturalistic ones, for the sake of purely verbal, if not anti-theatrical expression” (p.6), Ms Kovačeva argues for a reappraisal of representations of the abject and the ways in which, as she puts it, “the pre-verbal, semiotic, abject amplifies the encounter between the performer and spectator” (p.15).

Chapter 1 introduces the topic and delivers the theoretical basis of the thesis. Although there is a duplication of the heading “Abjection in theory,” in fact the chapter provides a sophisticated outline of Kristeva's understanding of the abject, and aptly placing it within psychoanalytic and poststructuralist discourse. Ms Kovačeva is to be complimented here on the depth of her reading, and the careful manner in which she maps this difficult terrain. The chapter then moves to the presence of the abject in aesthetic terms, in particular in feminist art practice. It surveys how live art performances by Marina Abramović, for instance, pivot on the presence of the mutilated body and, crucially, the manipulation of the spectator. The discussion of abject art is neatly linked with the provocations of what Aleks Sierz was to dub In-Yer-Face theatre in 1990s Britain and Dan Rebellato's work on bodily mutilation in plays of the period. Importantly, the chapter closes with an acknowledgement of some of the problems and limitations of the term, a manoeuvre that illustrates Ms Kovačeva's ability to not only summarise, but also to critically engage with her key terms in order to work with them further.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 concentrate on Kane, Churchill and Crouch respectively and each elaborates a contextually sensitive appraisal of the ways in which the abject appears in the selected plays. Not only do these chapters feature stylistically excellent writing, the analysis



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of plays is illuminating and the research that supports these analyses shows an aptitude for complex reflection. Among the highlights are the discussion of Kane's *Crave* in terms of the maternal and with reference to *Blasted*, the exploration of Churchill's *The Skriker* and the "damaged semiotic" (cf p. 42), and the reading of Crouch's *ENGLAND* in terms of contamination anxiety. Finally, chapter 5 provides a detailed overview of what has been attempted without overstating or simplifying the thesis's objectives.

Comments and points for discussion at the defence:

1. In chapter 3 the discussion of *Far Away* rightly underscores the significance of spectacle – I would like to hear more about the relationship between spectacle and abjection here and how you think it operates not just within the play but also between performance and spectators.
2. How would you counter the assertion that the term 'abject' seems much less well fitted to Crouch's *The Author*?
3. Gender is a potent aspect of the ways the abject and abjection operate in Kane (*Crave*) and Churchill (*The Skriker*) and is refracted through (pseudo)maternal relationships/desire – how does the absence (or diminished significance) of the maternal affect the manifestations of the abject in the other works you have selected?
4. At the start of the thesis you pose two questions: "Can abjection be staged without props and images [...]?" And consequently, does the term allow for a broader understanding than canonically endorsed – specifically in connection with the theatre?" (p.7) What are your conclusions now that you have reached the end?

With regard to the more practical dimensions of the work: This is an articulate and linguistically nuanced piece of writing. Although minor format errors remain, the presentation and format indicate a strong attention to detail. Ms Kovačeva's research is commendable, showing both initiative and, more importantly, mature critical judgement. Her sources are not only appropriately cited, but actively engaged and analytically with throughout.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "excellent" / 1.

10.8.2017

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD